

# Mentoring Law Students in Afghanistan

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In my short time as a Navy judge advocate, I have had many interesting experiences on land and at sea. One of my most rewarding experiences has been mentoring a group of young Afghan law students as they prepared for the Philip C. Jessup Moot Court Competition, commonly referred to as “Jessup.” Jessup is a prestigious worldwide moot court competition based on a fictitious international law case designed to prepare future lawyers for oral advocacy in the appellate courtroom.

While I was on deployment in northern Afghanistan, I advised high-level U.S. officers on issues of operational, fiscal, administrative, disciplinary, and human rights law. My days were spent reviewing project files, briefing my clients, preparing legal briefs for other staffers, and liaising with the police and other entities in the U.S. and NATO contingents.

In addition to my uniformed judge advocate work, advising the Balkh University Law School students allowed me to think creatively and make an additional impact on the local community. It was incredibly rewarding to work with these local students who are, without a doubt, the bright future of their country.

Jessup tests important contemporary international law issues, such as state responsibility and the preservation of cultural property. It questions areas in which the law does not provide definite answers.

First, law school teams from around the world prepare written briefs. The Balkh Law School team submitted a



Lt. Megan Romigh and Hamayoun Rahimi pose with the Jessup Cup after the 2012 Jessup Moot Court Competition at the Supreme Court in Kabul, Afghanistan. Romigh mentored and Rahimi was the advisor to the team from Balkh University, which won the competition in Kabul. ( Photo by U.S Embassy Kabul)

brief and then we held practice moot sessions in which the students got on their feet to argue in front of judicial panels comprised of other attorneys. In these rounds, we talked about the basics of public international law, the generalities of their case (advisors are not allowed to give substantive assistance), and oral advocacy tips. My colleagues and I were blown away by how polished and knowledgeable the students already were. They embraced any critique or suggestion and never repeated mistakes.

In January 2012, I had the pleasure of attending the Afghanistan National Jessup Competition. Four teams from around the country met in the vibrant capital city of Kabul. The law school students from Balkh were phenomenal. They carried themselves as seasoned international attorneys, not the fourth-year law students they were. I especially liked that they wore matching black suits and similar ties. To me, they already looked the part of national champions.

Balkh and Al-Birouni University advanced to the final round, held at the Afghan Supreme Court. After a lively two-hour round, it was announced that Balkh had won the competition. My heart swelled with pride. They were going to Washington!

After the judges and VIPs left the room, three of the students asked if I could take a photo of them sitting in the Supreme Court justices’ chairs, where the Afghan justices sit in sessions of court. I gladly obliged. Then I told the students, “Turn around, and look at those chairs—and think of this moment twenty years from now when you return here as Supreme Court justices or government officials.” They laughed, but I know my words will ring true someday.

Of all the conversations I had during my seven months in Afghanistan, one sticks out to me. The day the competition started, one of the competitors approached me and asked how long I had been in country. He then asked “What did you expect when you came to Afghanistan?” I thought about it, and I said I really had no idea. Hauling my gear across the tarmac upon arrival at Kandahar Air Field last summer, I was a little excited, a little scared, and unsure of what exactly I would do there. Now, looking back, my experience with the law school students from Balkh was the most rewarding of my deployment, and it created relationships that I know will last a lifetime. 🌟